



Prejudice between cultures

Module 2 11.1.2 prejudice and discrimination

This activity will help you to...

- Understand the nature of prejudice between cultures
- Understand how explanations of prejudice relate to prejudice between cultures
- Consider how cultures may differ from each other

What is a culture?

It is easier to name different cultures than to state clearly what a culture is. We talk freely about the differences between British and European culture, between European and American culture or between Western and Eastern culture. In doing so we presuppose that the members of each of these cultures share some characteristics that make them similar and differ in the same respects from those we class as members of another culture. But it is difficult to identify precisely what these culture-defining- characteristics are.

One way of defining culture is to focus on the ways that members of different cultures may perceive the world differently. Rohner (1984) does this in defining culture as:

‘an organized system of shared meanings which members of that culture attribute to the persons and objects which make up that culture.’

Rohner is saying that people from the same culture will divide up and organize their perceptions of the world in the same ways and understand objects, people, situations and events similarly. They share the same culture because they organise their experiences in the same way. It could be argued that Rohner overemphasises psychological aspects of culture at the expense of physical aspects (e.g. the types of foods that different cultures eat, the types of dwellings they build and live in) but that doesn't matter so much if it is psychological processes that interest us.

Do all cultures have prejudices?

All cultures seem to make a fundamental distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and it appears universal that they favour ‘us’ over ‘them’ for many purposes. Consequently it could be said that all cultures show a bias that could be regarded as prejudice. For example, in the language of some cultural groups the word for a member of the culture is the same as that for ‘human being’ (Konstantin, 2007), which may carry the implication that members of other cultures are somehow deficient. It certainly appears that a degree of **ethnocentrism** (the belief that one's own culture is superior to others) is a feature of most cultures that have been studied (West, 1967).

Cultures may demonstrate prejudices about others in a variety of ways including the stereotypes they apply to members of other groups, the ways they make sense of the actions of members of other cultures and, frequently, open aggression and hostility towards members of cultures not their own.

Do different cultures have different prejudices?

Not surprisingly, the prejudices of any given culture generally centre on the other cultural groups they come into contact with. People seem to reserve their most vicious prejudices for those they live closest to. The examples of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Tutsi and Hutu tribes in Rwanda and the disintegration of Yugoslavia into civil war between Bosnian, Serb, Croat, Muslim and Christian factions are testament to this. Clearly, it is unlikely that members of a particular culture will bother developing prejudices against groups they have little or no contact with

although it is fair to say that most cultures will have available general categories of person (e.g. 'black', 'Arab', 'oriental', 'outsider') that can be employed in the absence of specific information about a person's cultural origins.

The prejudiced beliefs typical of any given culture will generally reflect the characteristics that culture considers desirable (attributed to the in-group) and undesirable (attributed to the out-group). Consequently, it is possible to learn a great deal about what a culture values by finding out which characteristics it attributes to outsiders. For example, a study of White US university students in the 1930s (Katz & Braly, 1933) found that they attributed to 'Americans' the trait of industriousness and to 'Negroes' the trait of laziness. It is possible, however, for positive traits to be attributed to the outsiders. The same study found that the students attributed intelligence to Japanese people, Jews and Americans. However, this did not mean that the overall stereotype was positive: Jews were also considered 'mercenary' whilst Japanese people were considered 'sly'.

How do psychologists explain prejudice between cultures?

As discussed above, the prejudices of most cultures centre on those other cultures with which they have most contact. This is consistent with **realistic conflict theory** (Sherif, 1966), which would lead us to expect prejudice between groups to be greatest where there is competition for resources such as employment, power and land. If this view was correct, we would expect inter-cultural prejudice and conflict to show a relationship with conditions that would increase competition. There is some evidence that supports this view. Hovland and Sears (1940) found that White on Black violence (lynchings) in the Southern United States increased during times of economic hardship and decreased when times were better and Bobo (1988) found that support amongst White Americans for Black civil rights waxed and waned according to how well African Americans as a social group seemed to be progressing. During the 1960s, when African Americans gained large civil rights advances, support amongst White Americans dropped sharply. This may be because advances in Black civil rights threatened the superior status of Whites. This view is further supported by the observation that support by White Americans for Black civil rights rose again in the mid-1970s when fewer gains were being made by African Americans.

Whilst it is reasonably clear that competition is a variable that can exacerbate prejudice between cultural groups it does not follow that competition is the root cause of all intercultural prejudice.

Social identity theory would suggest that, since affiliation with a cultural group is likely to be an important aspect of many people's identity, a degree of prejudice between cultural groups is inevitable regardless of the level of conflict or competition between such groups. This prejudice can be quite subtle. For example, Taylor & Jaggi (1974) examined the perceptions that Muslim and Hindu office workers had of each others' behaviour and, in particular, how each group explained the behaviour of the other. Participants were presented with accounts of Muslim and Hindu workers behaving desirably or undesirably and were asked to suggest reasons for their behaviour. Results showed that both Muslims and Hindus had a systematic bias towards the in-group. When in-group members were depicted behaving desirably, participants made an internal attribution, that is, they explained the behaviour as being caused by the person. However, when an in-group member was depicted behaving in an undesirable way a situational attribution was made: their behaviour was explained as being due to circumstances outside their control. However, for out-group members the pattern was reversed so undesirable behaviour was given internal attributions ('they do bad things because they're bad people') and desirable behaviour was attributed externally ('they do good things by accident, not design'). This pattern of attribution helps people to enhance their self-esteem by making favourable comparisons between 'people like us' and 'people like them'.

Stereotyping plays a part in intercultural prejudice although the precise nature of its role can be hard to pin down. Clearly, cultural groups stereotype each other, with undesirable characteristics typically being attributed to out-group members (see above). However, the tendency to stereotype out-group members may be a consequence of a predisposition to be biased against them (as in

social identity theory) rather than the initial cause of prejudice. If this is the case, then stereotypes may play a more important role in maintaining prejudice than in causing it. Negative stereotypes may cause people to avoid members of other cultures. They are also likely to influence how the behaviour of out-group members is interpreted (c.f. Taylor & Jaggi, above). Either way, they will influence the processing of information about out-group members in a self-confirming manner. Stereotypes may also play an important role in the **legitimation** of prejudiced and discriminatory behaviour against members of other cultural groups. For example, it has been argued that the stereotype of 'primitive' and 'childlike' Africans was used to justify British colonial exploitation of non-Europeans (see Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' for an example of this).

Are some cultures more prejudiced than others?

This is a difficult question to answer, partly because comparisons between different cultures on a fairly abstract dimension like prejudice, which might be manifested in many different ways, are fraught with difficulty, and partly because the answers to such questions might be considered unpalatable in some quarters.

With those provisos in mind, there do seem to be some systematic differences in the prejudice of different cultures. Here, the word 'systematic' is used to mean that the differences are linked to the underlying structure of the cultures being examined and that it is possible, in principle, to predict something of the nature of a culture's prejudices from knowing what sort of culture it is. To identify such differences it is first necessary to identify ways in which cultures systematically vary. One dimension on which cultures seem to vary systematically is **collectivism-individualism** (Hofstede, 1980). Collectivist cultures place emphasis on the needs of the group rather than the individual, on duty to the in-group rather than individual pleasure and are characterised by a strong emotional attachment to the in-group. Individualistic cultures tend to emphasise the private self, individual autonomy and the priority of personal over collective needs. The cultures of Western Europe and the United States are predominantly individualistic whilst those of the Far East, Latin America and Africa tend to be more collectivist.

In relation to the dimension of collectivism-individualism, social identity theory makes a number of predictions. First, because of their emphasis on mutual interdependence and co-operation, prejudice between individuals is likely to be lower in collectivist cultures. Because people perceive themselves as being interdependent with other in-group members, people are less likely to be stigmatized for, for example, physical deformity or lack of certain skills (Triandis, 1995). However, because of their stronger affiliation with the in-group and their sense of 'collective self', we might predict that prejudice against out-groups will be stronger in collectivist cultures than in individualist ones.

There is evidence to support both of these predictions. Katz & Hass (1987) found that White prejudice against Black Americans was related to the tendency to make individualistic attributions for their disadvantage (e.g. 'they don't have jobs because they're lazy') whereas Kleugel (1990) reports that a collectivist outlook is related to lower racial prejudice and higher tolerance. These findings suggest that within a collectivist culture there is a tendency toward lower prejudice. Regarding the second hypothesis, Oyserman (1993) compared Arab and Israeli attitudes towards conflict in the Middle East and found that, in both groups, a collectivist orientation was related to increased hostility toward the out-group, just as social identity theory suggests.

Consequently, a comparison between cultures in terms of their prejudice does not generally support the view that some are 'more prejudiced' than others (although this may be true in some cases – it's just difficult to gather evidence for). We can be rather more confident in suggesting that different cultures express their prejudices towards different targets according to the outlook that culture promotes on the relationship between the person and the group to which they belong.

Questions to help you understand this topic:

1. Think of two cultures with which you have come into contact (they might both be your own). How do the 'shared meanings' of each differ? Are they more similar or different in the ways they make sense of the world?
2. To be ethnocentric means making the assumption that your own culture is 'right' and that, where other cultures differ from yours, they are 'wrong' or in some other sense 'lesser'. Can you think of an example of an ethnocentric way of looking at something?
3. List some examples of stereotypes that one culture might hold about another. These could be from your own experience or they might be examples you have read or heard about.
4. Briefly summarise how realistic conflict theory and social identity theory explain prejudice between cultures. Which do you find more convincing? Why?
5. Of the two cultures you identified in your answer to question 1, which would you say has the more collectivist outlook? Why?
6. According to Hofstede (1980) the UK has a very individualistic culture whereas Venezuela has a very collectivist one. Using the information in the article, suggest how a 'typical' British and 'typical' Venezuelan's attitudes toward (a) a homeless person and (b) an immigrant worker might differ.